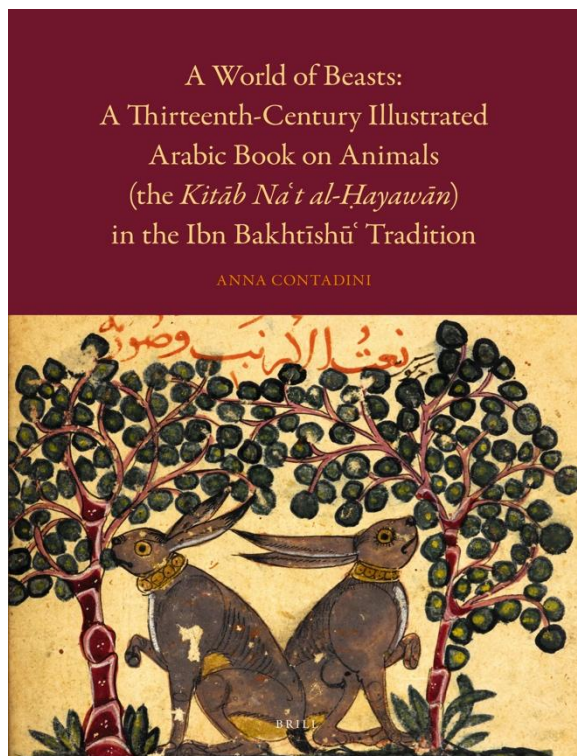


Project Report: Publication of *A World of Beasts: A Thirteenth-Century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (the Kitāb Na't al-Hayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū' Tradition*

Dr Anna Contadini

I am pleased to be able to report to the Islamic Manuscript Association that my book, *A World of Beasts: A Thirteenth-Century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (the Kitāb Na't al-Hayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū' Tradition*, has now been published (well ahead of the scheduled date of December 2011). I am very grateful to the Islamic Manuscript Association for the grant of £4,825.89 that covered the cost of the 155 full-colour illustrations contained in the book and made this publication possible.

This edition includes all the 86 paintings of the *Na't* in colour and includes 69 other illustrations from related manuscripts, so that it contains a total of 155 colour plates. Such an assemblage of illustrations is an invaluable tool for comparative research, not merely within the corpus but also, and importantly, beyond it. The colour pictures are fundamental, as the nature of colour is an integral part of the discourse of Islamic art history, and in particular of miniature painting, more now than has been recognised in the past. Only with such images can the book be effectively illustrated. Colour images also serve to ensure the broad appeal of the book beyond a limited scholarly readership.



The main manuscript studied in this publication, the *Kitāb Na't al-Hayawān* in the British Library, Or. 2784, datable to ca. 1225, probably produced in Baghdad,

is the earliest of a group of Arabic illustrated books on animals dealing with their characteristics and usefulness that belong to the literary tradition of Ibn Bakhtīshū'. The book considers both the confluence of textual traditions within this work and the stylistic and iconographic elements of its illustrations, which make it a key witness to early thirteenth-century Arab painting.

After a re-evaluation of previous approaches, the book analyses the manuscript in detail from a textual point of view, reconstructing its jumbled sequence, and discussing its paper, inks, colours and gold, with the aid of technical analyses conducted for the first time by the British Library conservation studio. It then proceeds to consider the sources of the text within the broad framework of zoological cum medicinal works both in Arabic and Syriac, and the biographical notices we have of the Bakhtishu' family of physicians. There follows an extended discussion of the paintings, starting with the frontispieces (of which the *Na't* has no fewer than four) and their significance not only within this manuscript but also within Arab painting in general. The discussion of human figures is also seen in the context of the treatment of posture and gesture in manuscript painting, with parallels also from the Western tradition. Then come the animals, and relevant examples are discussed with translations of the text and analyses of the particular forms of representation chosen, while the next chapter is the core stylistic and iconographical one where a meticulous analysis of the paintings in the *Na't* is situated in the context of other relatable thirteenth-century manuscripts, in particular the 1224 Dioscorides and the Reza Abbasi Museum Ibn al-Sūfī.



Ibn al-Sūfī, ca. 1225, probably Baghdad.
Reza Abbasi Museum, M. 570, Centaurus
with Lupus, p. 27.

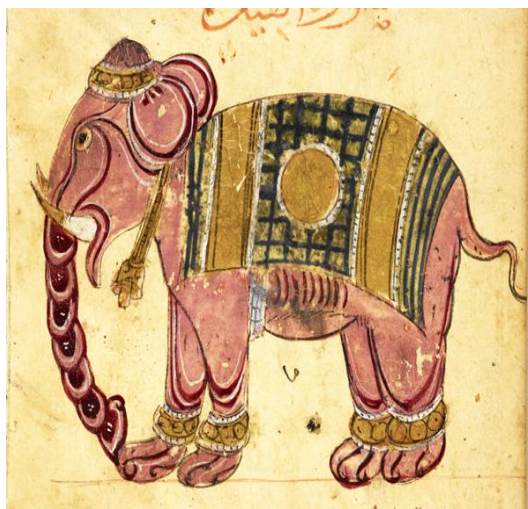


Dioscorides, dated 621/1224, probably
Baghdad. Purple Betony, detached leaf in
Harvard, University Art Museums, 1960.193.

Analyses conducted by a team of conservators and art historians at the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran have confirmed my doubts regarding the supposed twelfth-century date of the Ibn al-Sūfī, so that we can now firmly place that

manuscript within this group of three, relating its date to the 1224 Dioscorides and, on the basis of close stylistic relationships with contemporary and later manuscripts, concluding that it was most probably produced in Baghdad. This chapter also analyzes the composition and spatial arrangement of this and other manuscripts, as well as the stages of composition of the paintings, again aided by technical analyses. Chapter Seven discusses the date and provenance of the *Na't* itself, and by doing so considers the related problems that arise with manuscripts that lack a colophon. Having established with some confidence a date for the manuscript, the study then sets the *Na't* and related manuscripts against what production we have in the various centres we know were active in the period in question, analysing their characteristics, and proposing a geographical provenance and an affiliation to its possible political environment. Chapter Eight looks at issues of patronage and milieu, discussing the possible environments in which manuscripts such as the *Na't* could have been produced. Drawing on examples of Syriac and Western European manuscripts, it concludes that the *Na't* was most probably produced by and for an intellectual environment (as opposed to a royal one).

The book is completed by three Appendices, Bibliography and an ample Index.



Kitāb Na't al-Hayawān, ca. 1225, probably Baghdad. British Library, Or. 2784. Elephant, fol. 136r.



Na't – Turtle, fol. 82r.

'This is the first detailed study of an illustrated bestiary from the Islamic world. It sets this 13th-century Arab manuscript squarely within the context of both the Islamic tradition of animal lore and of classical and medieval Christian learning in this field. It is also a meticulous investigation and analysis of the art-historical aspects of this masterpiece of Islamic book painting. As such it is a pioneering and erudite contribution to Islamic art and literature alike.'

Robert Hillenbrand

Dr Anna Contadini
November 2011